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Speech

Amanda Spielman's speech at the ASCL Annual Conference 2021

A speech by Ofsted's Chief Inspector at the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) Annual Conference 2021.

From: Ofsted and Amanda Spielman
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This conference comes at an interesting time – your first or second week with everyone back after a long lockdown. I'm sure it's been intense, and I want to say thank you for everything that you've been doing to bring your communities back. I hope it's for good this time.

This may not be the first reopening of the pandemic, but there have been even more hurdles to clear third time around. You've all had to get testing up and running, along with the other measures that come with having children back – managing 'bubbles', masks, staggered starts and the rest of it.

Everything we're hearing says that you've more than risen to the challenge.

And spring has brought with it a sense of optimism. With the vaccination programme in full swing and cases receding, it does feel as though education is on firmer ground this time.

The importance of reopening

Opening schools was absolutely the right decision for children, who've missed out on so much through these repeated lockdowns.

The findings from our work since September remind us starkly of the ground to be made up. Despite all your efforts almost every child – regardless of background – has been affected to some degree.

And of course, that's not just about academic learning, as you'll be acutely aware. Being cooped up for weeks and months on end has piled on the misery for otherwise sociable and active children. So many have been bored and lonely – and getting very little exercise. Teachers have even reported to us that younger children have lost very basic skills, such as using a pencil, having lost the daily practice that comes from being in school.

We're also concerned about the children who've been hidden from view. School closures have made it much harder for you to keep a watchful eye on the most vulnerable children. Yet another reason why I'm sure you're relieved to have everyone together again.

Remote education

Then of course there was the mammoth effort to get remote education up and running. You have been working incredibly hard to help children learn at home.

And there's been a great deal of progress with remote education since the first lockdown, when the national picture was very uneven. Our latest inspections show that schools have been setting clearer and higher expectations for children, and doing more to monitor remote education.

But it's increasingly clear that for most children, remote education can never replace the classroom, however hard teachers try. It was a necessary stop gap, but one that home to school just how important it is for children to be in school – for academic, social and health reasons.

We all recognise that some children didn't have access to technology, or even a quiet space at home to learn. Children with SEND struggled without their usual support services, making it harder to access the curriculum at home. But for all the focus on access to remote education, perhaps the biggest challenge in all this has been motivation. And some parents simply had more time and capacity than others to help children get down to their schoolwork. As you told us on our visits this term, a significant minority of children just haven't been engaging.

With the best will in the world, schools haven't been able to avert an epidemic of demotivated children. Heads have told us that even the hardest-working pupils lost enthusiasm as time went on. Remote education requires great self-discipline – and that's something that home-working adults struggle with, let alone children.

That's not to say that this experience hasn't been useful. As we've highlighted in our research, you now have stronger approaches to remote education for those who do need to learn at home – such as those with long term illnesses.

Parent-teacher interaction has also been well served by technology. Many parents are probably more engaged with their children's education now than ever before. That could mark the beginning of stronger and more constructive partnerships between teachers and parents.

All that aside, children – and I'm sure teachers – will greatly benefit if learning remotely remains the exception, not the norm.

The catch-up effort

With all children back, it's fair to say that the catch-up effort (for want of a better phrase) is now beginning in earnest. I know nobody likes the term, and we certainly don't want to dent children's morale by over-using it, but we need to talk about the issue – whatever we call it.

We know that most children have learned less than usual over the past year. You need to teach them from where they are, not where you would have liked them to be.

The constraints of remote education have really hit subjects with a heavy practical element – like design & technology, PE and music. Now that children are back in school, you can give a more balanced experience, but the need for trade-offs will remain.

So you will already be making tough choices about your curriculum: what to prioritise; what to limit; what to omit. This is especially the case for children nearing the end of a key stage.

Pupils and learners won't benefit from racing through subjects at pace – so that everything is covered to some degree, but little is covered well; a sort of 'never mind the quality, feel the width' approach.

We all know that building and consolidating learning takes practice and repetition. So, this is about schools making intelligent choices, not simply cramming everything in. What do children absolutely have to know? What are the building blocks that will help them move on to their next stage? What's less important? And crucially, how does this differ from subject to subject? The approach that works for history, might not work for maths.

Compromises will have to be made. But please don't assume that from our perspective, superficial, but nominally complete, is the way to go.

This all means that accelerating children's progress is rightly a national priority, and there are many ideas up for discussion.

And while there are many routes to doing this, it's clear that for most children, getting back on track will happen through lessons in their normal classrooms, with their normal teachers. Making that core experience as strong as it can be, in terms both of what is taught and how it is taught, is tremendously important.

That's why I've said that schools know their children best, and what kind of extra help they need.

Most importantly, any additional activity layered in should come with minimal complexity or management burden.

Because there's a risk that we overload schools and colleges if this isn't carefully thought through. Every intervention will have to be managed at the receiving end, even if teachers don't deliver it themselves. And that takes staff time.

And Sir Kevan Collins is absolutely right to be focusing on time as well as teaching. Teaching time has never been more precious than it is now. So, this is also about making the most of every minute of the school day.

Just 15 minutes of teaching time each day adds up to more than 2 weeks over a year. I'm sure that working as efficiently as possible is a top priority for all of you.

I also believe that extensions of schooling will work well only if they are well supported by families – so that they don't feel like a punishment, for children or for their parents. A recent IFS study showed that many parents are sceptical about shortening summer holidays, for example.

Parents know that after a year of heavy restrictions, children need time with their grandparents, with their friends, to get out of the house, and enjoy themselves again. These are things that will help them learn well at school.

So, we ought to go with the grain. Without parental support, the children who most need help may simply not turn up. Or if they have to stay longer in the classroom, they may switch off and the extra time will be wasted. That risks widening gaps, not closing them.

This all needs careful consideration and detailed planning. But the pay-off for getting it right is enormous, and not just academically.

Children who are learning well and getting the wider school experiences – cultural, sporting, artistic and so on – with positive interactions with friends and staff – are likely to experience rapid improvement in wellbeing, leaving scarce resources to be targeted at the children most in need of help with mental health and other problems.

Continuous professional development (CPD)

In all the tumult of the last year inspection has rightly been far from your minds – but before I say a little more about where we are now, I want to revisit the pre-Covid conversation we were having with the profession about inspection.

This conference is all about CPD – important for any profession, and particularly so for education. And of course, high quality CPD isn't just good for school leaders and teachers, it's good for pupils too.

So, what role does inspection play in professional development? Well in my view, a significant one. There are several sides to inspection. Yes, it reassures parents and reports to government – those are 2 core purposes of our work. But inspection is also about adding value for the institutions we inspect.

Despite some initial trepidation, I know that schools and colleges have overwhelmingly found our visits and inspections over the last 2 terms to be helpful and constructive. Leaders have generally valued the opportunity to talk to a fellow professional about what's gone well and what could improve. We want to maintain that feeling of collaboration.

The education inspection framework (EIF) is still relatively new – it had only been in place for 2 terms before the world was turned upside down. But the early feedback from those of you who experienced an EIF inspection suggested the framework is fair, and focused on the right things. And you also said that the feedback from inspectors would help identify improvements.

An in-depth discussion about the curriculum – what pupils are being taught, how well they are being taught it, and how it sets them up for their next stage, is surely professional development in itself.

And that dialogue is at the EIF's core. It focuses much more on those professional conversations with you and your staff, and much less on data and performance measures. It brings the inspection conversation back to the curriculum and treats teachers as experts in your fields rather than as data managers – and that's something many of you have valued.

And these conversations about curriculum will be critical as we move forward.

Next steps

I'm sure you are expecting me to say something about where Ofsted is now and what we plan to do next.

I started by saying that we have good reason to be optimistic now. But I'm under no illusions about the challenges that still exist, and we understand that you are still under a great deal of pressure.

This term we've been carrying out monitoring inspections of lower graded schools and colleges – and, as I said earlier, we've had good feedback from you. We're currently talking to stakeholders, including unions and government, about the shape of our inspection activity for the summer term. I can't give you details today – we'll be able to set that out shortly. But I can tell you that what we're discussing is a sensible and proportionate next step, before returning to our normal inspection programme in the autumn.

Conclusion

As education gets back on steadier ground, there are plenty of challenges and tough choices ahead. But rest assured that inspection is not there to derail you.

I want Ofsted to play its part in helping schools and colleges get back on track – through inspection and professional dialogue that contributes to development. I want us to help, not hinder. And I certainly don't want hard-pressed teachers spending time on fruitless exercises to 'prepare for Ofsted'. That's true in normal times and it's vital right now. So please: don't run mocksteds, don't bring in inspection consultants, don't ask your staff to document their activity over the last few months, on the off-chance the inspector will call.

Just do the best for your pupils and students – in other words, what you always do.

Because ultimately, we all want the same thing. We all want each and every child to reach their full potential. No one wants to see a generation scarred by the events of the last year, or harmed by being burdened with adult anxiety. And I know that you will do everything in your power to make sure children get to where they need to be.

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